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Public Health Improvement Plan a Community Affair

By Melanie Reynolds

When you think of health, you probably think about it in personal terms: going to the doctor, taking needed medications, exercising regularly, eating healthy foods, and brushing and flossing your teeth.

But “public health” is the practice of preventing disease and promoting good health within groups of people, like the entire 64,000 residents of Lewis and Clark County.

The responsibility for public health extends far beyond the walls of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department. Hospitals, medical providers, emergency responders, schools, businesses, employers, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, civic groups, and individuals all have a role to play.

That’s why any effort to improve the health of our community has to involve the entire community.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define a healthy community as one that is “continuously creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential.”

I think it’s safe to say that all of us want to live in a place that is at least striving toward that definition.

That’s why the health department and St. Peter’s Hospital teamed up to lead a “community health improvement” planning process in the past year. The result is a plan that we hope the community as a whole will embrace and help to implement.

Last week, the hospital and health department released the “2013 Lewis and Clark County Health Improvement Plan.” It focuses on five top health priorities: mental health, substance abuse, chronic disease, maternal and child health, and access to health care. These priorities were determined by a wide swath of community representatives from businesses, organizations, and government agencies.

The plan is available online at www.LewisandClarkHealth.org and www.stpetes.org/CHIP.

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is to protect and improve the health of all county residents.*

The important thing about this plan is that it's a community plan, not a hospital or a health department plan. It represents the community's biggest concerns about health. All of us can play a role in implementing it, and all of us can benefit from it.

This long-term strategic plan has been nearly a year in the making. St. Peter's Hospital conducted random telephone interviews last fall with 400 residents to learn about their health status and needs. The hospital then convened a 17-member focus group to review the results of the survey and identify the health issues of greatest concern.

Meanwhile, the health department created a task force of more than 50 community members who met three times in late 2012 and early 2013. They, too, used the hospital data and the best available statistics we could compile to pinpoint community health priorities.

The task force identified eight specific goals and strategies to improve health:

- Improve the use of the mental-health treatment system by reducing the stigma associated with mental illness.
- Improve mental health through screening and early intervention.
- Improve mental health by ensuring access to quality mental-health services.
- Reduce substance abuse to protect the health, safety, and quality of life in the county.
- Reduce incidences of chronic diseases (such as cancer, stroke, heart disease, and asthma).
- Improve the health and well-being of women, infants, and children.
- Prevent unintended pregnancies among adolescents.
- Improve access to health-care services.

The plan also includes steps individuals can take to improve their own and others' health.

It's a lofty plan, and it won't work unless we all embrace and act on it in a collective manner. It's going to take the dedication and commitment of individuals, businesses, government, and community sectors to make these health improvements happen.

We want to invite all county residents to read and comment on the "2013 Lewis and Clark County Health Improvement Plan" by July 22.

Again, it's available online at www.LewisandClarkHealth.org and www.stpetes.org/CHIP. To request a printed copy, contact Gayle Shirley at the health department, 457-8908, or gshirley@lccountymt.gov.

You can submit comments to healthinfo@lccountymt.gov or mail them to Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department (attn: Gayle Shirley), 1930 Ninth Ave., Helena MT 59601.

If we all chip away at these goals from our own little corner of the universe, I'm convinced we really can make progress toward a healthier county and a better place to live.

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